Notes on Credentialing of Dissertation Advisors and Outside Chairs

Questions have arisen concerning the role of Outside Chairs on Dissertations, the ongoing monitoring of dissertation quality, collective responsibility of faculty (dissertation advisors, dissertation committee members, and outside chairs) for maintaining dissertation quality, procedural challenges relating to Outside Chairs, and the role of tenure-earning faculty as dissertation advisors/outside chairs.

Overview
It is important to frame this discussion of credentialing dissertation advisors and outside chairs within the context of central strategic directions for the university and college and our aspirational goals to become a Top American Research University. Specifically, considerations pertinent to credentialing issues include our focus on building and sustaining high quality graduate doctoral programs, research productivity, and successful completion of doctoral degrees in a timely manner.

Serving as a Dissertation Advisor provides positive benefits with regard to the above goals and with regard to tenure and promotion of faculty. Faculty supervision of doctoral student research groups leads to increased research productivity. Mentoring graduate students in research leads to increased research productivity. Dissertation advising is valued highly at the university level for tenure and promotion of faculty. Just as mentoring faculty in the university and college dissertation and doctoral degree processes, mentoring faculty in the conduct of research groups enables a win-win for students and faculty, and positive benefits for the college on significant outcomes.

Prior to 2003, the college credentialing system excluded and delayed faculty from assuming a dissertation advising role. The current system is decentralized to the department level, and enables more faculty to serve as dissertation advisors and outside chairs for dissertation proposal and final defenses (see table describing credentialing criteria and procedures by departments). The current system still excludes some faculty under the guise of protecting tenure-earning faculty at the assistant professor level. However, tenure and promotion at the university level values dissertation advising, and our practices in some departments may jeopardize tenure-earning assistant professors. Additional challenges and questions remain with our current system of credentialing dissertation advisors and outside chairs.

It is important to recognize that the role of Outside Chair is important to the quality of dissertations and success of dissertations. As such, the role of Outside Chair is one that should be shared among all productive and credentialed faculty.

Questions and Concerns
A central question revolves around responsibility for quality control of dissertations, shared among faculty and or with the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs.
Many faculty who advise dissertations serve also as Outside Chairs. Some faculty serve as dissertation advisors but routinely refuse to serve as Outside Chairs. Some faculty who are no longer productive in research are credentialed to serve as Outside Chairs.

All departments have some criterion with regard to research productivity. Is this monitored to determine the currency of research productivity consistent with criteria? Does anyone lose credentialing if research productivity criteria are not met? Is there a relationship between research productivity, dissertation advising, and teaching load? Who is responsible for monitoring currency of research productivity and maintenance of credentialed status?

Some Outside Chairs have complained about the apparent role as one of managing a meeting, while also experiencing some significant concerns with the quality of some dissertations. Some Outside Chairs have expressed concern that they have received dissertations, with signed forms indicating that a document is ready for proposal or final defense, when the dissertations were far from ready for defense. Defense meetings have turned into pre-defense meetings; documents are poorly written, that do not follow agreed upon format (APA, etc), with poorly articulated questions, methodology that does not connect to questions, poorly understood/described methodology, poorly understood/described analytic procedures, inadequate literature review, etc.

Committee members, contrary to explicit directions, have signed the form indicating that they have read the dissertation and attest to its being ready for defense. Outside Chairs have reported that committee members have come to defense meetings, having obviously not read the dissertation and expressing surprise at the fact that a dissertation is not ready for defense. Indeed, there have been some forms with signatures that appeared to have been signed by a single individual.

Some quantitative dissertations ask questions that cannot be answered with statistical methods acquired in one’s coursework. Insufficient background of the student may limit the methodology and analytic procedures and therefore the dissertation questions. Who is responsible for monitoring whether the student has sufficient background to conduct the planned dissertation?

Some qualitative dissertations are conducted by individuals with no or inadequate coursework in qualitative methodology to enable successful completion of the study. Who is responsible for monitoring whether the student has sufficient background to conduct the planned dissertation?

What is the role of CORE and of Measurement and Research faculty in providing supports, monitoring quality of methodology and analytic work on dissertations? Could CORE serve as primary consultants for “routine” analytic procedures, and perhaps certify the understanding of doctoral candidates, thus freeing M&R faculty from such routine dissertations. Could M&R faculty and faculty with expertise in qualitative methodology serve only on dissertations with more complex methodological and analytic issues?
What is the responsibility of faculty in updating our knowledge in multiple research methods and analytic procedures, so that we all can serve as constructive committee members, and able to be contributing committee members and outside chairs regardless of method? The issue is not one of being experts in multiple methods and analytic procedures, but in being intelligent and constructive members of dissertation committees so that quality does not rely upon a single individual.

Could the role of Outside Chair be enhanced to assume an evaluative role? There are universities where Outside Chairs are expected routinely to provide a brief careful evaluation of the dissertation and the dissertation process. With an expectation for such a careful evaluation as a routine part of all dissertation proposal and final defenses, no one dissertation or dissertation advisor is singled out for review. Rather everyone in the Outside Chair role shares in the evaluative function, thus removing the evaluative role from being the sole responsibility of the Associate Dean.

Questions related to potential action steps:

- How do we ensure an equitable sharing of the Outside Chair role?
- Who is responsible for monitoring currency of research productivity and maintenance of credentialed status, and how is this done?
- Who is responsible for monitoring whether the student has sufficient background to conduct the planned dissertation?
- What is the role of CORE, of faculty in Measurement & Research, and of faculty with expertise in qualitative and mixed methodology?
- How do we ensure (or create opportunities for) faculty updating knowledge in multiple research methods and analytic procedures?
- What is the role of the Outside Chair in helping ensure the quality of dissertations and dissertation processes?